THE FICTION OF STEPHEN CRANE AND ITS CRITICS

BY

JOHN CONRAD BUSHMAN

B.A., University of Illinois, 1936

M.A., University of Illinois, 1937

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN
ENGLISH IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF
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THE FICTION OF STEPHEN CRANE AND ITS CRITICS

In an appendix to my discussion of *The Fiction of Stephen Crane and Its Critics* I have presented a rather detailed history of Crane's reputation of which the following is a summary:

Crane's first novel, *Maggie,* was almost entirely unnoticed when it appeared in 1893. Because of its subject, it was published at the author's expense and neither the author's nor the publisher's name appeared on the title page. But the *Red Badge of Courage* made Crane famous overnight. Its publication in America in the fall of 1895 provoked widespread critical discussion to the effect that it was a work of rude but tremendous power. The consensus was that the book, in spite of grammatical errors and certain unsatisfactory mannerisms of style, set a new fashion in the writing of war fiction. The applause in England when the book was published there early in 1896 was equally enthusiastic. There was again objection to Crane's grammar and to some of his characteristics of style, but the praise far out-weighed all such reservations. H. G. Wells has said that when *The Red Badge* appeared in England it took the reading public there by storm as no other book had for many years.

Crane also gained a favorable reception for such succeeding volumes as *The Little Regiment and Other Episodes of The American Civil War, The Open Boat and Other Stories,* and *The Third Violet.* There was the usual protest against the author's unconventional grammar and diction, but his vividness and originality were received with delight.

Crane's experience with *Maggie* and *George's Mother,* his stories of the Bowery, was, however, quite different. *Maggie,* as I have said, was almost unnoticed on its first appearance. It had very few readers, and at that time only Hamlin Garland seems to have reviewed it. He was astounded at what he considered its social truth and its absolute originality of style. When *Maggie* was republished after *The Red Badge* had made Crane famous, it received more praise of the same kind from William Dean Howells and (somewhat later) H. G. Wells. But it also suffered

the most outraged abuse, as did its companion piece, *George's Mother*. Critics in both America and England, in their disgust, applied such epithets to the stories as "coarse", "vulgar", "animal". There was little moderation in the attention *Maggie* and *George's Mother* received.

By the time Crane died in 1900 most of the furor his slum fiction had aroused had subsided. The commonest opinion of his literary career was that it had been one of brilliant promise: he had done some fine work and might have gone on to do even finer. But three well-known critics of the time went considerably farther in their praise. Elbert Hubbard declared that Crane ranked with America's greatest writers of fiction. William Dean Howells wrote that America had not produced a more distinctive talent. And H. G. Wells, in a long eulogy, made the assertion that Crane's work had initiated a new movement in literature.

After these glorious oblituaries Crane for fourteen years virtually passed out of the consciousness of literary critics. There is little mention of him in the texts on American literature of the early years of the century, and not a single article is listed under his name in a magazine index until 1912. It took the outbreak of war to remind critics of Crane's *Red Badge*, and then of the rest of his work. Hamlin Garland, who was the first to praise Crane while the latter was still alive, seems to have been the first to rediscover him after his death. Garland was the author of a very enthusiastic article on *The Red Badge* which appeared in the *Yale Review* in 1914. It was followed by appreciative essays during the remainder of the decade by Edith Wyatt, F. L. Pattee, Harriet Monroe, and Joseph Conrad.

In the twenties enthusiasm for Crane burst like a flood. Alexander Wollcott a few years ago indicated the attitude toward Crane of the literary world of that decade: it was a period, he said, "when it was a fashion among the younger writers to spend at least ten minutes each day in severely admiring Stephen Crane." The latter became the darling of the young post-war rebels, of the people who were in revolt against smugness, optimism, provincialism, "puritanism", sentimentalism, and other quali-

ties that Sinclair Lewis, H. L. Mencken and their followers attributed to American life. Conceived of as a martyr to late-Victorian respectability, Crane became a kind of saint to this group. In this decade Crane's work was extensively republished, both in magazines and in book form. In 1925 and 1926 there was issued the ambitious and expensive *Work of Stephen Crane* under the editorship of Wilson Follett, with introductions to the individual volumes by Willa Cather, Joseph Hergesheimer, Sherwood Anderson, H. L. Mencken, Carl Van Doren, William Lyon Phelps, Thomas Beer, and others. During this decade two book-length biographies of Crane appeared. And in Newark, New Jersey, there was formed a Stephen Crane Association, which, for a commemoration service in 1924, collected some remarkable statements in appreciation of Crane from such writers of the day as Theodore Dreiser, H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, Carl Van Doren, Stuart P. Sherman, Zona Gale, Floyd Dell, and Rebecca West.

During the thirties the enthusiasm for Crane among those whose main concern is current literature died down. The interest in him in this decade manifests itself in the many new books on American literature in general and American fiction in particular. In the books of the thirties the young academic liberals took up where the magazine liberals and radicals of the twenties left off. To these book writers Crane has been the genius of the American nineties. But in this period there is also considerable depreciation of Crane. In the books of the New Humanists Crane is called a naturalist and is, as such, damned. In the one Marxist book on American literature that I have read he is, if not damned, at least severely criticized for the limitations of his insight into social causes. The controversy over Crane's importance in the thirties is the result primarily of fundamental differences in social values.

This, in outline, is the story of Crane's reputation. It is apparent that Crane's contribution to American literature is still considered important (whether for good or evil), but it is equally apparent that Crane's work is to an extraordinary degree a subject of controversy. Critics have, from the first appearance of

Crane's work to the present time, differed widely over its merit; they have, in fact, contradicted each other again and again. One gains the impression that Crane's work is for some reason especially difficult to evaluate.

I have tried in this thesis to resolve some of the contradiction in the criticism of Crane. On the subject of his characterization, for example (an aspect of his fiction over which critics have often disagreed), I have written a chapter. I have maintained that Crane, with two or three rather conspicuous exceptions, presented his characters brilliantly. His aim was to draw types of ordinary human beings—common soldiers, cowboys, Bowery "toughs". There are few uniquely individual persons in his pages. His genius lay in the representation of the ordinary behavior of very ordinary people. He liked to show such people as they experience the elementary emotions of fear, anger, egotism, and humility; and he regularly put them in situations which call forth such emotional responses: he often, in fact, put them in situations in which almost all human beings act alike.

His impressionism enters into his characterization: his power of selection, which is the chief virtue of his impressionism, enabled him to present his characters with great economy. Crane has to an unusual degree the power to "hit off" his characters through dialogue and through details of behavior such as gesture. He can reveal a great deal about them by reading them from the outside.

In other chapters of this thesis I have, in passing, attempted to resolve other contradictions in the criticism. I have in the very first chapter been at particular pains to do this. This chapter is entitled "What Crane Writes About", and although it consists in the main of synopses of the most important novels and short stories, it contains interspersed discussions of what is characteristic in Crane's writing. I have quoted Joseph Conrad and David Garnett, who spoke of Crane's "incomparable insight into primitive emotions" and of his "wonderful insight into and his irony deriding the swelling emotions of the self".

The conclusion to this chapter points out that one of Crane's main interests in fiction is fear: *The Red Badge* is a study of a

man's fear and of his final triumph over this emotion. Other stories such as *The Blue Hotel*, "The Snake", "The Five White Mice", and "Horses—One Dash" also are studies of fear. In such stories as "A Man—and Some Others" and "Twelve O'Clock" Crane's interest is in aggressiveness (in the fighting emotions) divorced from fear.

In a number of Crane's stories there is strong emphasis on the heroism of the common man and on the pathos of his naiveté.

Four of Crane's main efforts (*The Monster*, *Maggie*, *George's Mother*, and *The Blue Hotel*) present characters who are the victims of social forces over which they do not have control.

In the *Whilomville Stories* the main interest is the comedy of the children's playing-at-life and the tragedy of their cruel tribishness.

The concluding sentiment of the first chapter is that Crane was greatly concerned with cruelty: the conscious and unconscious cruelty of people, and the cruelty of human institutions and of fate. Crane's attitude toward the victims of such cruelty was one of pity; to the perpetrators it was one of bitterness that often took the form of grotesquerie.

* * *

Although I have been concerned in this thesis to dispel what seem to me misconceptions about the quality of Crane's fiction, my main object has been rather different: it has been to examine at length and as definitively as possible the aspects of Crane's fiction on which there is general critical agreement. All critics suggest that Crane was something of a naturalist and a "realist", and all maintain that he was an impressionist and a forerunner of much that is characteristic in the American fiction of this century. A number have said that he is an ironist, and more, I believe would have said he is, had it occurred to them to do so. I have therefore written chapters on Crane's naturalism and realism, his impressionism, his irony, and his historical importance. In the final section I have ventured to say what stories of Crane's are of permanent importance.

In calling Crane a realist sympathetic critics have usually had reference to his frank, unsentimental representation of the sordidness of the battlefield and the Bowery. But in using this term such critics have not had in mind merely Crane's readiness to tell unpleasant truth. They have also implied that Crane's work represents a reaction to conventional romanticism; they have called Crane a realist because they have found in his work an anti-romantic, anti-heroic point of view. They have taken delight in the fact that the characters in Crane's fiction are for the most part ordinary or less than ordinary people, and that the author presents them with the tolerant depreciation of irony. In praising Crane's realism such critics have thus made clear the historical importance of Crane's work; they have honored Crane for saying what previous American writers, for one reason or another, neglected to say. But to such critics, since they are admirers of his work, Crane is a realist also because his work is important for itself.

During the last twenty years Crane has much more often been called a naturalist than a realist. But naturalism to most critics has mean very much what realism meant to earlier critics. The terms always overlap in meanting.

Crane's fiction to a considerable extent conforms to the standards of the naturalists. It reflects, for instance, a belief in determinism. The main characters in Crane's best-known novels (Maggie, Dr. Trescott, and the Swede, in *Maggie, The Monster,* and *The Blue Hotel,* respectively) are victims of the deterministic influence of a social group. There is also considerable determinism in *The Red Badge,* particularly in the early chapters, where Henry is shown as feeling that for romantic youths such as himself warfare is a kind of social trap.

Crane is also naturalistic in that his characters are commonplace and have commonplace (that is, un-heroic and often more or less contemptible) feelings and impulses.

To another standard of naturalism, scientific objectivity, Crane conforms only in part. This standard prescribes that a

fiction writer tell the whole relevant truth about his characters and that he refrain from moralizing, particularly of the expository kind. Crane, except that he is sometimes too much concerned to point out his characters' shortcomings, fulfills the first of these requirements. The second he does not measure up to. It is true that he does not interrupt his presentation of the story of Maggie with passages of conventional sentimentality or denunciation. But he is very much of a moralist, and in such stories as *The Blue Hotel* he cannot resist explaining the moral of the narrative. Crane is either overtly or by implication highly moral. It is not characteristic of him to withhold judgment.

Impressionism

The literary impressionist has two objectives: he tries (1) to render the visual experience of the beholder with such precision that this experience becomes individualized, and (2) he distorts reality in response to an emotional bias. Ordinarily these two objectives are part of a single objective which can be defined as the individualized representation of an emotionally colored response to an experience.

Crane's prose has characteristics that fit this definition of impressionism: precision and emotional distortion are conspicuous.

There are several kinds of Cranean impressionism, but the kind one encounters most frequently is the "pathetic fallacy". Crane, in other words, often applies animate qualities to the inanimate world. He, for instance, writes about "sober houses", "terror-stricken wagons", "gloomy street cars".

Some examples of this kind of impressionism are on the level of childhood experience: they have the charm of a Walt Disney cartoon. Other examples are more powerfully effective. They represent reality as conceived by characters under strong emotional stress, and they are satisfying to the reader because in the stories in which they occur the reader's point of view is the same as that of the character.

An important aspect of Crane's impressionism is his unusual handling of colors. He writes, for instance, of a "lurid alter-

cation", of the "fervent red" of a person's face, of the "red rage" of cannon. Actually such phrases as these are not as radical as they may at first seem. They are telescoped figures of speech, and are thus in the company of Crane's innumerable metaphors and similes. Crane's metaphors are ordinarily swift and economical; his similes are often elaborate and unusual. When the latter are of this sort they first startle the reader, then overwhelm him with their aptness.

Crane's prose is full of figures of speech of all kinds, and because these figures are original his prose is especially vivid and rich in connotations. Crane as an impressionist makes some of the mistakes of the innovator, but he often has the power to convince the reader that many another recognized writer of fiction is by comparison pedestrian and prosy.

Irony

Irony is a quality of Crane's fiction that has not often enough been pointed out.

There are three kinds of irony, all of which can be found in Crane: they are irony of Fate, dramatic irony, and rhetorical irony. Both irony of Fate and dramatic irony are inherent in a dramatic situation which the characters involved do not wholly understand. Irony of Fate is not amusing to the Spectator—that is, the reader; dramatic irony is. In a human situation in which irony of Fate operates, the best efforts of a character are stultified, and the reader is moved to compassion because he feels akin to the victim. To dramatically ironic situations the reader remains detached; his enjoyment lies in an understanding which the characters do not have.

Rhetorical irony is a depreciative kind of comment by the author on the foibles of his characters. It ordinarily involves more or less grandiloquent language.

Irony of Fate is to be found in *Maggie* and *The Monster*. The principal characters in these novels are morally superior to their communities, yet the communities condemn and punish them. Justice is outraged, and the reader strongly sympathizes with the victims. Neither Maggie nor Dr. Trescott could have acted

otherwise than he or she did, and their communities could not have been expected to respond much differently than *they* did. The conflict in each of these novels is thus a necessary one.

Dramatic irony is common in Crane's fiction. Examples of it are to be found in "The Open Boat" and in the story "The End of the Battle". Crane in these stories, as he does in numerous others, exploits the naiveté of his characters for purposes of humor; but he is not unsympathetic. Compassion is an instinctive complement to his irony.

Rhetorical irony is very common in Crane's fiction, and takes a number of forms. Crane by means of it mocks various kinds of *excess*. Crane likes, for instance, to mock extravagant notions of heroism and grandeur. His eye is, in fact, caught by any kind of pretense or pretentious appearance. He has what could be called an ironic temperament, which explains his special sensitiveness to all varieties of incongruity. He has a strong sense of humor to direct against characters and situations that are in one way or another incongruous. But his humor is often mingled with bitterness, and sometimes bitterness succeeds in drying up his humor altogether.

Crane's Historical Importance

Numerous critics have declared that Crane has considerably influenced twentieth century American fiction, and several representative American fiction writers of the past generation (such as Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Joseph Hergesheimer, Zona Gale, and Floyd Dell) have, in praising Crane, implied that the contention of these critics is justified.

Crane may or may not have had an important influence on his successors: it is obvious that he had many of their interests. He, for instance, anticipated them in a preoccupation with social determinism. The determinism in *Maggie* and *The Monster* looks forward to Dreiser's *Jennie Gerhardt* and his *An American Tragedy*, to Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*.

The criticism of small town life in *The Monster* and the *Whilomville Stories,* mild though it is, suggests the beginning of "the revolt against the village" of Anderson, Lewis, Masters, and others. The sympathy which Crane expresses for ostracized people (such as Maggie, Dr. Trescott, the gambler in *The Blue Hotel,* the man with the shady past in "A Man—and Some Others", the beggar woman in *Maggie*) is likewise reflected in post-war literature. Crane had by his practice made it more possible for fiction writers of the last generation to write serious fiction about Negroes, Jews, political radicals, prostitutes, hoboes, drunkards, and other groups of people who are partly or wholly unacceptable to the social majority.

Crane also set a precedent for later writers by his enthusiasm for "the little man". In his ironic but essentially sympathetic representation of ordinary soldiers and of ordinary young men in civilian life, he implies a special interest in traits that such "little men" have in common. Crane has an unusual talent for making his characters seem representative of others like them. In this respect he reminds one of later writers (like Dos Passos and Steinbeck) who have been concerned to suggest through particular characters, the relation of masses of people to each other.

Both *Maggie* and *The Red Badge of Courage* are historically important. The latter has often been called the first "modern" story of war. It anticipates Eric Remarque, Henri Barbusse, and John Dos Passos in presenting as "hero" an Everyman who is an undistinguished representative of the masses of common soldiery—a man who has little comprehension of the whole war, and who suffers agonies of fear, weariness, and boredom, but who does as bravely as he can what is expected of him. *Maggie* is historically important for three reasons: it preceded the whole later flood of novels about sex problems; it is the first serious American novel about slum life; it is (as far as I can tell, and in the opinion of a number of critics) the first ironic novel by an American.

Crane, it seems to me, must have taught the post-war generation of writers a good deal about irony. This generation made

(along with satire) a great use of irony to express it dissatisfaction with certain qualities of American life.

I believe that Crane has had a considerable influence on Ernest Hemingway. The two writers certainly have a good deal in common: a preoccupation with physical heroism, with the uncontaminated "natural" man, with manliness to such an extent that one sometimes suspects neuroticism.

Crane is also important historically for his impressionism. As Harry Hartwick and others point out, numerous post-war novels contain Crane's kind of impressionistic metaphor and simile. This may not be an important kind of influence, and may not be lasting. Another aspect of Crane's impressionism, his gift for selection, has probably more deeply influenced American fiction; but this influence is not easy to demonstrate.

Finally, there is Crane's influence on the form of the American short story. As an exponent of the plotless variety, he provided models for all the writers for the "little magazines" of the post-war period, for all those short story writers, including Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway, who wrote in more or less conscious opposition to the O. Henry tradition of the clever ending.

Crane has probably contributed to the general de-emphasis of plot which characterizes a great deal of post-war fiction and drama.

The Stories That People Will Continue To Read

One reason for the many contradictions in the criticism of Crane's fiction is that much of Crane's work was for a long time relatively unavailable. This is far from being the only explanation, however. The primary reason that Crane has not had much objective appraisal is that he has been used as a weapon by opponents in the controversy over naturalism. Critics, for this reason and for others, have too often been merely impressionistic about Crane. For instance, the defects of his fiction which are defects by any standard have not often been pointed out.

Crane's best work (*Maggie, The Red Badge,* the *Whilomville Stories,* and a number of other short stories) will be read for a long time to come. The *Whilomville Stories* are as good as any other stories about children in American literature. The *Red Badge of Courage* is still the best American story of Everyman-in-battle, and if it is superceded it will still have readers because it has an atmosphere—a humor, a color, a pathos—all its own. *Maggie* will be read by young people because they will continue to be aroused by its spirit of outrage against social hypocrisy.

I believe thus that a large portion of Crane's small body of work is eminently readable and very much more than historically important. In reading Crane's best stories one need not remind oneself that they "pointed the way" to a good deal of recent American fiction. They can stand on their own merits. They are, in fact, equal to most of the American fiction which they helped inspire. Crane did not need a long apprenticeship in which to develop his talent; neither did he need more than a few suggestions from literary tradition out of which to build both a style and a philosophy. He began and finished writing early in life and early in the development of a literary movement, but his position in American literature is secure.

VITA

John Conrad Bushman, son of Conrad and Helen (Ebner)) Buschmann, was born March 28, 1914, in Chicago, Illinois. He attended public schools in Chicago and entered the University of Michigan in September, 1932. In 1934 he transferred to the University of Illinois, from which institution he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1936 and a Master of Arts degree in 1937. In 1937 he married Betty Jane Nelson. They have a three year old daughter. Since the fall of 1937 he has been an assistant in English at the University of Illinois and has worked toward the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. He is a member of Alpha Kappa Delta, honorary sociology fraternity, to which he was elected in February of 1935 and of which he was president (University of Illinois chapter) during the spring term of 1936.